

## Health Literacy and Understanding Medical Information

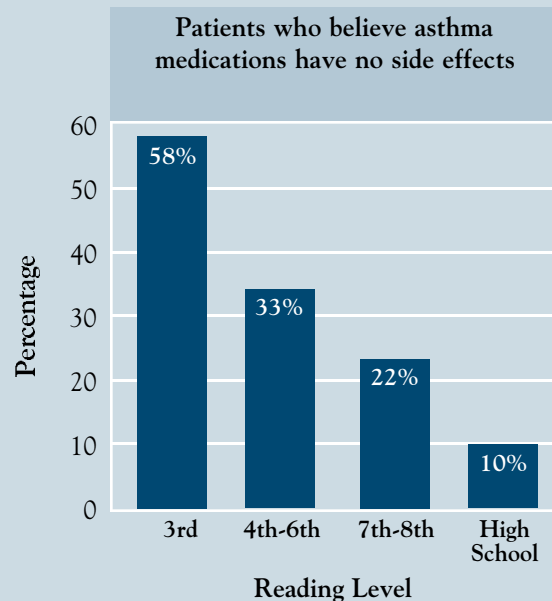
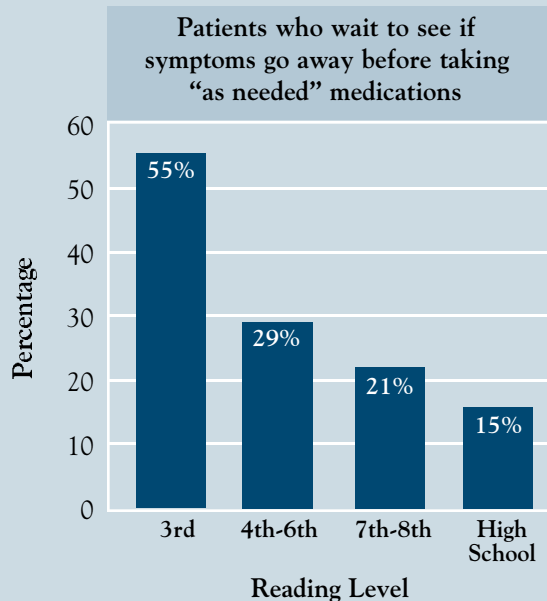
**Patients with poor health literacy skills struggle to understand basic medical forms and instructions.**

*“... [W]hen they give you papers to fill out ... you want to know what it means before you sign it ... [but it’s] sign this, sign that. I don’t know what that means.” — A patient<sup>1</sup>*

- It is especially difficult for less literate patients to fill out intake forms, enroll in insurance programs for which they may be eligible, get services once enrolled, follow medical instructions, or give informed consent.
- Most informed consent and insurance forms, and most medication package inserts, are written at high school level or higher.<sup>2,3</sup>
- Of 979 emergency department patients with inadequate health literacy:<sup>4</sup>
  - 81% could not read the rights and responsibilities section of a Medicaid application.
  - 74% did not know if they were eligible for free care.

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### Asthma Patients’ Misunderstanding Regarding Medications<sup>6</sup>



Source: Williams, et al., 1998.

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## Prescription labels and self-care instructions are among the most important written materials patients receive.

Poor compliance with medication and care regimens can be dangerous. Yet serious mistakes may occur because the patient cannot read the instructions.

- Among 659 public hospital patients, those with poor health literacy skills were five times more likely to misinterpret their prescriptions than those with adequate skills.<sup>5</sup>
- Reading skill was the strongest predictor of asthma knowledge in a study of 483 patients. Only 11% of those reading below a third-grade reading level could use their metered dose inhaler correctly.<sup>6</sup>
- HIV-positive adults with low functional health literacy missed more treatment doses than patients with high health literacy because they were confused by the instructions in a study of 182 patients.<sup>7</sup>

## Poor health literacy has legal ramifications for health care professionals.

It is up to the health care system to be sure patients understand the information they receive well enough to apply it.

- The Food and Drug Administration, Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations and the National Committee for Quality Assurance all require that health care institutions be able to document evidence of patient understanding of the medical information provided to them.<sup>8-11</sup>
- But none of these can document whether a particular patient understands the one form they need at the moment. This leaves it up to the person requesting the data, the provider conducting the procedure or writing the prescription, or the practitioner providing the instructions *to ask* the patient what s/he understands.

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